1: Federal W-5 (no date) 1986
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
Georgia

*Yamacraw**

YAMACRAW TAKES ITS NAME FROM THE LITTLE INdian town that Tomochichi, chief and friend of General Oglethorpe, established on the Savannah River bluff west of the township of Savannah over two hundred years ago. Today waterfront industries have pushed the Negro district southward from the bluff, but it is still so close to the river that some of the small shanties rattle when winds roar across the water.

In this community the residents are drawn largely from coastal counties of Georgia and South Carolina. At one time an unruly element gained Yamacraw the reputation of being the toughest section of Savannah, but the presence of an unusual number of churches of various denominations seems to have improved law and order in recent years. Intense religious interest is aided by pride felt in the fact that the first Negro Baptist church in America was established here and also that Methodism gained an earlier start among Yamacraw Negroes than in any other part of the county.

In spite of the difference in religious doctrines there seem to be certain common beliefs handed down in families. We found an implicit and readily asserted faith in the power "tuh do unnatchul ting." Ghosts are everyday experiences. Root doctors are in constant demand.

** Old Yamacraw has gone. Since late in 1939 there has been a radical physical change under the program of the Federal Housing Administration. Two thirds of the tumble-down brick houses and wooden shanties in the once crowded area have been replaced by modern concrete buildings with low rentals for Negro tenants.*

1: Federal W-5 (no date) 1986
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
Georgia

Pin Point

PIN POINT, A NEGRO COMMUNITY ABOUT NINE MILES southeast of Savannah, is scattered over some twenty or thirty acres on a peninsula overlooking Shipyard Creek. Many of the small wooden cabins are neatly whitewashed and are half hidden by shrubbery and spreading oaks. Flowers and vegetables are planted in the most advantageous sunny spots near the houses and most of the yards are enclosed by picket fences, giving a cozy and pleasant privacy. The lanes, little more than wagon tracks, twist in and out and across the settlement. The informal and haphazard scattering of the houses, with high shrubbery bordering the lanes, gives an effect that is pleasing and unusual.

Pin Point has a church, a pavilion on the tidewater creek, and a crab cannery. The men and women who do not work as domestic servants at the nearby country places find employment in the crab cannery or fish and crab and shrimp for themselves. The life is quiet, soothed by the smell of the salt marsh.

It is only when some great excitement takes place, a stirring religious service, a dance at the community pavilion, a death,[37b, c] or some scandal concerning a neighbor, that quiet Pin Point bestirs itself. Recently, one of the fishermen ventured into the foreign waters of the Ogeechee about ten miles distant and there he was almost devoured by an alligator. All that was left of him, "the ham," was given a burial [2] amid the loud lamentations of his relatives and neighbors.

The people are, almost without exception, black or dark

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

twenty-dollar bill from his wallet, tore it in half, gave her half of it, and told her he would give her the other half when she finished weaving the coasters. He left thinking that he had indeed made a bargain. Feeling somewhat dismayed by the whole procedure, I asked her how she could afford to make the coasters for only twenty dollars if it took her a week to weave them. She smiled slyly and said she could make them in a matter of hours.

Social Structure

The ways of the Sea Islanders, as I have said, offer valuable insights into an Afro-American culture which has had relatively little contact with the customs of the white majority until very recent years. According to one group of researchers, the unusual circumstances which created the culture also "created a unique psyche for Blacks in the Sea Island area":

> We have seen their consequences in a number of ways in our research. We constantly encounter elderly Blacks whose knowledge of and acquaintance with whites is very limited. They have not had to interact with whites or the majority culture in the same way as Blacks in the other parts of this country. Many of them have a fierce kind of pride and a lack of fear which is seldom seen in other places. The self-doubt and sense of inadequacy and inferiority often cited as characteristic of the Black psyche are not found to the same degrees in our Sea Island research.[42]

Their preserved traditions, too, set the Sea Islanders apart from other Americans, black or white. The extended family is the norm in the Sea Islands. Most islands are sectioned off into family communities, where all members of one family, their close relatives, and people remotely related live or have a right to live as long as they can satisfactorily show evidence of kinship. Land is not normally sold to family members but is passed on through an unwritten contract called "heir's land"; if land *is* sold to relatives, the charge is only one dollar to fulfill "legal tenets of the state."[43]

Land ownership is closely aligned with kinship, and kinship is the primary social factor necessary for acceptance into island communities. One must be born, reared, and have a known family history on a

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

given island in order to be accepted as a natural member of the community. Members who are brought to the islands as spouses are recognized as members by association with a known island family, but even one who has been married to an islander for twenty or more years never achieves the status of a full member of the community.

Membership is most often established through oral transmission of lineage, as opposed to birth certificates or other documents. Thus one is expected to know one's lineage, for this knowledge can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection in any social setting. It is normal protocol, for example, for a young person to undergo seemingly intense interrogation by an older island resident who wishes to place the younger person. If one can explain satisfactorily who one's parents are, who one's parents' parents are, or even who one's cousins' parents are, then kinship is established and one is viewed as a member of the community to be accorded all due warmth and hospitality. The islanders can be chilly and sometimes openly hostile to strangers, black or white, who have no local kinship ties or affiliations.

As would be expected in such closed communities, familial ties, marriages, and the concept of the extended family are taken with utmost seriousness. The extended family is an African-like social tradition on the Sea Islands, just as it is in most inland black communities; acknowledging and readily accepting the obligations and responsibilities due not only to one's spouse but also to one's spouse's family is a part of island culture. The "conjugal bond is strong and literally lasts until death parts the spouses," and common-law marriages are as valid and stable in the eyes of the community as those marriages contracted under law. There is a low incidence of divorce and separation. Disagreements and conflicts do arise in Sea Island households, of course as they do in any household. But understanding and accepting the relationships inherited in an extended family appear to alleviate many of the conflicts experienced in the sort of nuclear family that is characteristic of European cultures, such as mother-in-law/daughter-in-law antagonism. Like the members of extended families in Africa, people on the Sea Islands act with deference toward their elders, and most elders accord a great degree of respect to young adults, especially those with children. That is, conflicts are minimized because each member acknowledges and respects the others' domains.[44]

Most of the inhabitants of any given island are related; thus marriage between persons from the same island is not encouraged. Chil-

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

175 567 794 797

The Committee on discipline are requested to obtain if possible the presence of all the colored elders, at their meetings; as from them and them alone [the elders] must they expect to receive legitimate reports, of Deaths, the prosperity of their societies or backsliding members.[41]

When societies first came under jurisdiction of the Church each one bore the name of their black leader in charge. But by 1850 societies were under governance of a white brother living on the island and the organizations named after their locations. Rather than attend the white church, the black membership was directly affiliated with black societies for purposes of "religious instruction and worship."[42] Thus, black societies were the vehicle through which the Gullahs as Baptists participated in the Christian experience.

175 567 794

Although white brethren ultimately were ostensible leaders of black societies, the structure and supervision of the organizations still provided the slaves with some autonomy. Ideally the white brother in charge of a given society held monthly meetings with society members, scrutinized the slaves' activities, conducted religious exercises, and examined candidates for church membership. Each white brethren was assisted by one or more blacks (depending upon the size of the society) called "watchmen," "elders," or "deacons," appointed by the church at the suggestion of the "brother in charge." In reality, however, the black deacon continued to direct the society. He was responsible for "general watchcare" over the society, and conducted society meetings "to inquire into and report . . . cases for discipline that may come to his attention." He was also at liberty "to hold meetings for worship and exhortation . . . on such plantations as he may have received special permission," and to administer communion. The black elder was in turn aided by "help" on each plantation with a sufficient number of society members. The help supervised members on the plantation, held prayer meetings, and reported weekly to the elder, naming those slaves desiring to join the society. According to a former Sea Island slave, a black exhorter would preach "to de field hands down in de quarters. . . . Meet next day to de Marsa's and turn in de report, how many pray, how many ready for baptism and all like dat."[43]

175 567 (621)

Gullahs had a measure of control in terms of internal structure and worship within black societies. How they transferred that into community cohesion is discussed later. Planters primarily wanted plantation discipline preached, breaches of discipline punished, and corrective retri-

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

it's dis way. My master call me up, and order me a short peck of corn and a hundred lash. My friends see it, and is sorry for me. When dey come to de praise-meeting dat night dey sing about it."[3]

The slaves' loyalty was to the Praise House rather than to the Baptist church few of them ever attended. Even during Northern occupation and after the Civil War, Gullahs continued to gather at the Praise House whenever trouble befell their community. Despite the fact that white Baptist churches were almost completely under black control during the war (in terms of both structure and organization), the source of power on the plantations was still the Praise House. And after the war, Gullahs continued to see it as the center of group life and to conduct themselves according to Praise House customs and regulations.[4]

Since the Praise House congregation consisted of families who knew, through daily contact, the personal life of a candidate, it was possible to scrutinize behavior and to ostracize an individual, not so much on purely religious grounds as for breaches of trust within the quarters. Elders and members exerted great disciplinary power over plantation hands, having the right to "turn dem outen de Pray's House if dey ain't fur walk right." Hence, while the Gullahs probably attached little significance to church disciplinary measures instituted by the master, but which they, as Praise House members, were forced to implement, a crime against one of their own was a different matter. Long after slavery, the Praise House continued effectively to hold its members responsible for good behavior, and the influence of these small units of the church has long been credited for the fact that crimes were rarely committed among Gullahs. In the 1920s the Beaufort sheriff stated that the Praise Houses kept Gullahs law-abiding even as freedpeople, "because the Negro fears the Lord more than he fears the law." Yet it was not "fear" so much as a desire for harmony and a sense of love and respect for each other that allowed Gullahs to maintain integrity in the community. The significance of Praise House loyalty and community membership as a social regulating force has been observed by researchers as late as the 1970s.[5] Existence of these plantation meetinghouses conformed to the desires of slaveholders, but they also served to strengthen bonds of kinship and a sense of commonwealth among the Gullahs.

Gullahs often expressed time in terms of before or after they "had sense." The concept puzzled Northern teachers who worked among them during the Civil War. "Catching sense," as the Gullahs called it, a term still used today on some Sea Islands, refers to the time when a person

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

each other to live as "one body" also allowed them to operate collectively and ward off the demoralizing effects of exploitation. A central element in their religious attitude was a sense of individual honor. Love for their fellows, and a respectful disposition would find favor with God. This orientation was often expressed in terms of "manners." "A Christian is mannerable," the Gullahs were fond of saying. One Gullah soldier, in his supplications to heaven, implored, "Let me lib so dat when I die I shall *hab* manners." Northern teacher Harriet Ware described an old Gullah woman, Widow Bedotte, who had been driven insane by watching her master whip her daughter to death; "very sad it is to hear her talk," wrote Ware. Yet, although Widow Bedotte's epithets against her master and the rebels were voluble and denunciatory, "she prides herself upon her good manners, which she says she gets because she belongs to the church, which every now and then she joins again." Charlotte Forten observed the Gullahs' attitude toward each other:

> These people are exceedingly polite in their manner towards each other, each new arrival bowing, scraping his feet and shaking hands with the others, while there are constant greetings such as, "Huddy? How's yer lady?" ("howd' ye do? How's your wife?") The hand-shaking is performed with the greatest possible solemnity. There is never the faintest shadow of a smile on anybody's face during this performance. The children, too are taught to be very polite to their elders, and it is the rarest thing to hear a disrespectful word from a child to his parent, or to any grown person. They have really what the New-Englanders call "beautiful manners."[9]

Despite enslavement and poverty, the Gullahs maintained a generous attitude, never allowing one of their number to go without food or shelter. Kinship was important, but the Gullah concept of a household did not necessarily mean filial attachment, but all those living within a family and community structure, with the rights, duties, and privileges therein. While there were many children without parents because of the ravages of bondage, reportedly there were no orphans on the Sea Islands. Gullahs were also fond of bestowing presents upon their Northern benefactors, or anyone whom they considered a friend. Gifts of sweet potatoes, peanuts, and eggs which had a special spiritual significance and were rather expensive, were often offered to visitors. "They feel hurt if their presents are refused," wrote Laura Towne. "Old Susannah often sends to table, fish and other extras. They don't want pay. No indeed."[10]

While the Christian example contributed to inspiring a kindred spirit, the Gullah's sense of charity also had another source. African peoples

533 enjoyed at parties. Congregational singing in church is
535 often accompanied by dance movements and clapping, particu-
[196] larly on the part of older women. Story telling is also a
538 highly valued activity, with males of all ages being especi-
888 ally skilled at this art. With old age, the obligation to
538 remember and relate oral history of importance to the family
or the social group is placed upon both males and females.
Young people spend many hours with old people, listening to
these historical accounts and to the stories of ghosts and
spirits which abound in the area.

.621 The closed community of the island can be usefully
compared to more open black communities on the nearby main-
land. Three different island residents expressed spontane-
ously, at different times, their appreciation for living in
a community where "nobody bothered you." The closed nature
of the community makes for less interference from the domi-
464 nant whites. Land ownership and a relatively long history
484 of independent conduct of their daily affairs on the island
[157] has made for self confidence and willingness to try new jobs
and live in unknown cities at least for short periods of
[166] time. Islanders frequently live and work off the island
during their middle years, returning to live on the land
owned by their families in their old age or when their aging
parents need their help. Geographic isolation has also meant
limited job choices, however. None who engaged in business
or professional occupations have been able to remain on the

6: Smith I,Y-5 (no date) 1989
NN23 Sea Islanders. NN23
South Carolina

121 Consequently, as more Black parents seek knowledge of their
855 West African heritage and strive to rear their children in
178 an African framework, the potential contribution of Sea
Island child rearing research is evident.

181 The Sea Islander is known in contemporary Black folk-
121 lore as funny talking and quick to fight. The other view
is that the Sea Islander is extremely religious and quick
•[621] to pray. Perhaps the single most recurring report is of
the cultural cohesion of Sea Island communities. It is
this cohesiveness which makes Sea Islanders a unique
source for research on discipline behavior.

121 Certainly the relative isolation of Sea Island commu-
621 nities adds to the possibility that its inhabitants would
861 have similar life histories, beliefs and attitudes. These
factors have been shown to act as correlates of discipline
behavior. The cohesiveness of the Sea Island communities
suggest that the Islanders may have similar predispositions
toward discipline. Consequently, the Gullah people are a
unique source of data of the effects of antecedent condi-
tions on discipline behavior.

121 In the continued absence of systematic data on Sea
Island family systems, it may be difficult for significant
numbers of Black parents to develop clear conceptions of
child rearing within a West African heritage. Hence, be-
fore undue emphasis is placed on direct comparisons of West

6: Smith I,Y-5 (no date) 1989
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
South Carolina

121 in light of mother's discipline role.[21] As an overall
861 judgement, extended families may tend to have the more
593 restrictive discipline pattern. This assumption is based
596 on the relationship between family living space and disci-
603 pline behavior. Sea Island homes tend to be small and confining which should allow for further test of this relationship.

121 Isolated Sea Island parents may use physical punish-
861 ment in disciplining more than parents living nearer to
621 mainland. This tendency may be anticipated for two reasons: (1) Sea Islanders may occupy lower positions on the socio-economic scale than mainland parents, (2) Sea Island communities are cohesively structured. This community cohesiveness is reflected in their practice of the discipline philosophy of two for one. Under this practice any misbehaving child can be disciplined by any member of the community. As the practice goes, after disciplining the child, the neighbor reports the child's misbehavior to the parent. The parent in turn has the responsibility of thanking the neighbor for a good deed. After which the child is again beaten on two accounts: (1) because of the misbehavior and (2) because the child's misbehavior has case "bad light" on the parent.

---

[21] R. S. Tach, The Role of the Father in the Family, Journal of Experimental Education, 20, 1952, 319-361.